

Baroque Performance Practices of Figured Bass Accompaniment

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03 29 2012

The notion of performance practices within the Baroque period has long been a topic that has spurred and incited much debate which has resonated throughout musical performing culture for centuries now. Throughout the past century, many have attempted to recreate the instrumental constructions and aesthetics of this period that appear to have been lost through the modernizations and romanticizations applied by interpretations during subsequent periods. These trends were quite notable in the subsequent interpretations of J.S. Bach's works which tended to become intertwined in periodized expressions of neo-romanticism or "New Objectivity".¹ As the Baroque period transitioned into the Classical and beyond, instruments were also altered and changed. Gut was replaced with steel on violin strings,² while others even destroyed outright and used was kindling wood, such as many harpsichords during Napoleonic times (due to their association with the former aristocracy).³ With this stated, there appears to be many missing links of information, in both the performance, and instrumental-related aspects of the Baroque period. There are also countless performance practices that generate a quite formidable task to discuss with any notion of concrete certainty⁴. Despite these challenges in historical research, however, the use of the figured bass could be described as a reliable fixture of this period, and also one of great relevance to much of the music embodied in this generation. This discussion will aim to examine the role and importance of the figured bass during the Baroque era, as well as its attributes that bring it into focus within the era's performance practices.

Described as a hallmark of the Baroque period by music theorist Robert Gauldin,⁵ the practice of figured bass, also known as thoroughbass (*basso continuo* in Italian) emerged into compositional traditions around the year sixteen hundred. Despite encountering some initial resistance in France, the technique would ultimately become widespread⁶ as it became a type of evolutionary outgrowth from the organ basses notable in earlier works such as Alessandro

Striggio's forty-voice motet of 1568 titled *Ecce beatem lucem*.⁷ Its alternate names *thorough* and *continuo* were derived literally from its constant presence throughout a score; even during rests notated within the bass sections. With this stated, the figured bass technique was essentially a type of skeletal structure that merely included the bass line, along with numerical symbols. Through the combination of these two musical elements, the performer was expected to realize the harmonies of a given score; a compositional technique that would soon become commonplace throughout the period until approximately the year seventeenth-seventy.⁸ The function of figured bass differentiated itself from the earlier technique of *basso seguente*, which simply duplicated a keyboard part in the lowest voice register of the polyphonic texture. The figured bass practice of half-improvised musical shorthand basically evolved through the desire of composers to reduce the emphasis of musical accompaniment, instead placing it upon the solo voice which was the vehicle for both the text and message of the given musical setting.

While Lodovico Viadana claimed to have utilized figured bass as early as 1594, musicologist Claude Palisca cites three early examples of the figured bass published between 1600-1601 which are Cavalieri's *Rappresentatione di Anima et di Corpo*, Peri's *Euridice*, as well as Caccini's version of the opera, while citing the score of Cavalieri's *Godi turba mortal* from *Intermedio VI* written in 1589 as an example of why the figured bass was a necessary development.⁹ Notation of this manner proved to be rather cumbersome when four-part accompaniment was undertaken on an instrument such as the chitarrone (which was also used during this work's 1589 performance). By essentially stripping down the score to only exhibit the basic relative information through the bass and treble, the performer could better utilize an accompaniment through means of improvisation that better suited his instrumental practice,

whether he or she was executing the particular work through lute, harp, or some form of keyboard instrument.

Upon examination of Cavalieri's score of *Rappresentazione di Anima et di Corpo*, one observes that the only instrumental part accompanying the voice is that of the bass line. Residing above the bass part are numbers such as 11, 7, and 6/4, referring to the respective note intervals over which to generate the chord above the bass. When the score omits a number residing over the bass note, the performer then builds a chord using a third or tenth above it, generating a major or minor chord relative to the given key. These major and minor formations may also be altered by simply utilizing accidentals over the bass. According to Palisca, a fifth or twelfth is typically fashioned above the bass, however, the inclusion of the number 6 indicates the replacement of the fifth with a sixth or one of its compounds, while a sharp placed before a 6 indicates the raising of a semitone above the sixth in relation to the key, and a sharp following 11, 4, or 7 denotes the advent of a major tenth, third, or sixth above the given bass tone.¹⁰ This practice is also common in relation to the use of a suspension.

While there were clearly outlined methods, it is important to note that the specific technical practices of figured bass were in no way a static phenomenon during the Baroque period. For example, shortly into the seventeenth century, composers omitted the aspect of specifying the octave in which they desired dissonances, simply writing a 4 instead of a more tonal specific 11. It should also be realized that while composers such as J.S. Bach and Arcangelo Corelli were quite forthright and meticulous in figuring their bass lines, there were also composers who were less concerned with this function, assuming the performer would exercise their own judgement to create the appropriate chord by assessing the upper musical

part(s). This more laissez-faire approach was notable amongst composers of the Italian tradition.¹¹

While it could be argued without much question that the compositional output of the Baroque period was unified more through an expressive ideal than any particular series of practice techniques, the application of the figured bass also seems to reveal a number of shifts in compositional attitudes from composers of his period. By heavily incorporating this technique into their work, it appears that interest relating the notion of lush texture of equal moving sections progressing by means of independent lines was phased out in favor of a structure entailing one or two solo sections in the treble register over the underlying bass line. With this said, the function of the bass line evolved from a type of very rigid foundational application to that of one expressing greater rhythmic and melodic balance between the upper and lower registers.¹² What this appears to reveal is that composers seemed to have become increasingly disinterested in these middle-range elements; preferring instead to focus upon the outer voices and leave the remainder to the discretion of the performer. Also revealed is a new found importance resting upon the bass foundation that was never before present.¹³ According to Manfred Bukofzer, the figured bass also marks both the beginning and end of the period, leading some musicologists such as Hugo Riemann to even refer to the Baroque era as *Generalbass-Zeitalter*.¹⁴ While this may have been a rather bold statement considering that a great volume of solo instrument music existed during this period and the figured bass continued practice well into the eighteenth century, it remains true that all ensembles of the Baroque period utilized the figured bass function. The figured bass component was also significant enough to require a special note of absence when omitted on a score (the exception being in keyboard works).¹⁵

It is quite interesting to observe that despite vast amounts of ornamentation and stylistic aesthetics employed in the works of this period, the figured bass has often been described as more of a symptom, as opposed to a cause; reactionary to the harmonic polarity between the bass and soprano. This illustrated a drastic shift in relation to melody, harmony, and counterpoint through a modernized dualist type of score writing. This led music theorists of the time such as Agostino Agazzari to draw distinctions between what he referred to as fundamental and ornamental instruments; fundamental being utilized for keyboard accompaniment and figured bass, while those of ornamental nature with melody.¹⁶ It was strongly believed that through these two factors, the integrity of the fundamental musical contours would be preserved and along with it, the ultimate musical performance. While the idea of accompanied melody itself could be traced back to the cantilena style of the fourteenth century in the Burgundian chanson, or even the early frottola,¹⁷ the shifted emphasis upon the bass and the illumination of the treble register was truly what made the figured bass a ground breaking innovation of the Baroque period.

In context, the Baroque period was definitely an era molded and shaped by the affections and the expressive qualities of performance. While much of the instrumental practice appeared to play a more supportive role during this time, one could easily rely upon the inclusion of the figured bass element to be a fixture of the compositional output in this period. While many other performance aspects continue to be debated regarding Baroque music, the notion of figured bass is one the most clear and observable devices amongst the many notable compositions of this era.

End Notes

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⁶ Palisca, Claude. *Baroque Music*. Prentice Hall. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey. 1991. P. 265.

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¹⁶ Bukofzer, Manfred. *Music in the Baroque Era*. W.W. Norton and Company. New York, New York. 1947. P. 11.

¹⁷ Grout, Donald. *A History of Western Music*. W.W. Norton & Company. Toronto, Ontario. 2002. P. 258.